

# What Matters in Contemporary Art?

## A Brief Statement on the Analysis and Evaluation of Works of Art

Christiane Wagner

### Abstract

This essay seeks to provide an idea of the basis of the main theories of contemporary art criticism. It begins with the assumed knowledge and tradition of the Academies of Fine Art, with their ideal of beauty and classical structure. The importance of such traditional references has its origin in the Renaissance in the 16th century, in Florence with Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), in Haarlem with Karel van Manda (1548–1606) and, above all, in Paris with Charles Lebrun (1619–1690) of the French Royal Academy, which established the first strict rules for the fine arts and was a reference for Europe as a whole. Academies of Fine Art were established in the major European capitals, and from the 19th century, in the Americas and worldwide. The themes and rules presented over the course of history always related to the functions of art and the legacy of classical thought as tradition. However, values and ruptures, ethics, ideologies and political ideals, and the progress of science have conditioned the fundamental importance of the renewal of Western thought. This essay concerns the decline of tradition in the arts, the lack of ideologies guiding modern art, and the transition to contemporary art. The main theories that marked this transition period—20th and 21st century—are analyzed with respect to the art, its criticism, and the theories to the understanding and transformative sense of artistic creation. Such creativity usually appears strange or transgressive to the public and primarily to be seeking a legitimation of the artist's autonomy of choice and freedom of thought. On the whole, this essay presents the main aesthetics notions relating to the critical analysis of traditional European cultures and, more recently, American ones too. American culture, in which the languages of art are based, is analyzed for its effect on occidental philosophy. Both theories of art and contemporary aesthetics are emphasized so as to better understand the work of art's current aim with regard to the discernment of theoretical, prescriptive, and ideological thinking in the visual arts.



Dan Peterman, *Kassel Ingot Project*, Iron ingots, produced in collaboration with DK Recycling und Roheisen GmbH, Duisburg, Germany  
Photo: Christiane Wagner, documenta 14, Kassel, Germany, 2017.

## Introduction

The dissolution of the traditional values of the fine arts, developed during the 17th and 18th centuries, was the reason art in the late 19th century could no longer be understood or assimilated in its purposes. Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, a conservative public prevailed against the provocations of the artistic avant-garde in the face of modern society's utopias. A series of artistic, avant-garde movements emerged, bringing art and social reality closer together, reaching their peak in the 1960s. Then came artistic achievement that was no longer understood by the ideologies prevalent until the end of the 1970s. Art entered a period where it sought meaning from the lack of orientation, which was understood as a crisis for it. However, this moment meant the end of modern art for many art theorists and historians. References to artistic creation no longer held the same senses due to the lack of aesthetic criteria and the ideologies that guided modern art to its peak. Therefore, there was no meaning for contemporary creations and, especially, for art criticism. If, first, the meaning of these creations was not clear, then any judgment of aesthetic value would be without the necessary basis for the formation of opinion, classification, and definition on what could be accepted as art. Thus, through theories of analytical thinking, a possible and plausible reading began to drive art criticism, providing a language for reading and understanding works.

The 1980s proposed a new context for society. The individual gradually established and affirmed its autonomy of choice and participation. In art, the process was the same, but without the striking ideologies that modern art defended at that moment of social and political involvement. It was underground art for the system and often provocative, which – contrasted in the following years, post-time – became more allowed without objecting or resisting, a period known as postmodern. Thus, in contemporary art, through context and concerning modernity, we can understand the postmodern period as a moment of transition and know that it is a neologism, not specifically meaning an artistic movement or wave but only an expression to define this moment of changing values understood as the crisis of modernity. The social, political, and economic history in their cultural paths and experiences have always been transferred to art. However, these cultural experiences belong to the historical moment, in the Hegelian sense of the spirit of the time, *Zeitgeist* – by which the individual in his/her consciousness acquires autonomy and the notion of freedom for its development and evolution.

Therefore, this individual or artist—in his/her current socio-historical context, wherein meaning exists in globalization, democracy, and, above all, consumer society—is conditional in all these experiences becoming the aspiration of an idealized democracy. Such process is analyzed when the authenticity criterion of art transforms the artistic production relations and social functions into art, in respect of cultural value as political and social progress seeking the “democratization of art”, and to discuss the democracy and the sociopolitical context regarding inequality, post-colonialism, exploitation of minorities, immigration, race, gender, and climate change. For example, in documenta 14, curator Candice Hopkins stated: “a set of masks from the series, *The Undersea Kingdom*, co-produced by Canada Council for the Arts, was specifically made for ‘documenta 14,’ by Beau Dick, who was a hereditary chief, an activist, and a cultural leader, was an active means for the First Nations communities to resist the more than 500 years of colonization,” as figures 1 and 2 show.



Figure 1. An installation view of Beau Dick's *The Undersea Kingdom* at documenta Halle. Curator: Candice Hopkins. Photo: Christiane Wagner, documenta 14, Kassel, Germany, 2017.



Figure 2. Beau Dick, *The Undersea Kingdom*, co-produced by Canada Council for the Arts.  
Photo: Christiane Wagner, documenta 14, Kassel, Germany, 2017.

Moreover, this kind of artwork should be situated in the socio-historical context to understand the meanings of this creation. However, on the one hand, it is essential to the historical and anthropological aspects; on the other hand, a direct relationship with the ordinary allegory of celebrations for a general audience is more common. Furthermore, the relation of the object and its sense or function should be considered when being displayed in one of the most representative contemporary art events, "documenta 14."



## Languages of Art

With the autonomy of art, globalization, and the ideal of democracy, we find the works of analytical thinking in the world of art among contemporary texts that propose a theory of the language of art – to greater relevance, the publications of Nelson Goodman. In these works, we discover the characteristics of nominalism – i.e., limited awareness of a representation of signs or words, evoking something that is unique, because the ideas or generalized concepts are not represented. This professor has served at Harvard since 1967 and been a partner of the Walker-Goodman Art Gallery in Boston for 12 years, a great collector of ancient and contemporary art; he also founded Project Zero at Harvard, stimulating analytically rigorous research that encompasses the knowledge of the cognitive arts. In treating objects and qualities, this theorist affirmed that there is no external ontological foundation opposing metaphysical “platonism.”

Platonism in this sense is a *contemporary* view. It is obviously related to the views of Plato in important ways, but it is not entirely clear that Plato endorsed this view, as it is defined here. In order to remain neutral on this question, the term ‘platonism’ is spelled with a lower-case ‘p.’ Platonism is the view that there exist such things as abstract objects — where an abstract object is an object that does not exist in space or time and which is therefore entirely non-physical and non-mental.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, Goodman theory offers relativistic constructivism, by which the world would be constituted of diverse worlds and of the diversity of objects that are in him; this would not be discovered but constructed. However, in this universe of different forms of object representation, the author understands it as various forms of the world, depending on how the different manifestations or appearances of objects are perceived or understood. In this way, knowledge would be possible only through organization and classification to distinguish or resemble categories – thus justifying that this organization is not offered by nature, but by the human through various means. In short, for him, there are many ways of sorting and organizing infinite versions of worlds – *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978). But Goodman also defends the existence of a general criterion, specifically in the universe of the arts, so that work can be accepted through what is called the “mode of reference and types of symbol systems.” This criterium is presented in *Languages of Art* (1976), to favor the predicates that allow more efficient use of our cognitive resources and linguistic and thinking

habits, building worlds. His systematic study of symbols and symbol systems aims at understanding how the process of perception works and creative attitudes in the arts; the analysis of schema types and symbol systems allows us to address some persistent problems concerning representation and description. The set of symbols (scheme) is related to the references (domain or medium), a proper relation of the symbolic system that determines the elements, providing a syntactic structure that establishes a normalization for that element to symbolize, as well as a semantic structure that specifies the symbolized element. This process allows us to identify the references—denotation, exemplification, representation, expression, etc.—elements in symbolic action by syntactic and semantic function. However, without properties to define any emotion—just a logic rather than emotional, a form of symbolic relation as communication—it becomes a technical and distant analysis of aesthetic experience. But Goodman defends the aesthetic experience as a dynamic relation, by which the identification of symbols becomes part of the process of interpreting works.

Communication thus becomes the primary purpose for symbolization, as humanity must communicate to relate socially, through symbols and means of communication. Therefore, the work of art is understood as communication medium, transmitting messages, and in this way, also becomes an object of the communication sciences. Symbolization is a method of interpreting, reading, and understanding fundamental to cognitive goals in analyzing a work of art. However, regarding the aesthetic experience, we can conclude, in the author's definition: "the aesthetic properties of a picture include not only those found by looking at it but also those that determine how it is to be looked at" (1976, 111–112). In short, Goodman did not differentiate science from art, as in the empirical observation of aesthetic experience. Art and science would be a symbolic system and a means of constructing the world—*Ways of Worldmaking* (1978). However, since Baumgarten, aesthetics has strictly existed in another dimension, not the dimension of logical knowledge, because it instead belongs to the dimension of sensibilities and emotions. However, for Baumgarten, art is a medium, the principle of knowledge, not just the medium of representation, while Goodman defines an aesthetic based no longer on an essence with tradition in Western Europe. Goodman's philosophical orientation with an Anglo-American art of thought defines analytical aesthetics to include an understanding of works of art as a form of communication, a message medium. However, beyond the infinite possibility of meanings and the many contents of what art can express, Goodman disregarded classical notions of the traditional philosophy of art.

The most significant are pleasure, satisfaction, and relational issues to aesthetic judgment, like beauty, taste, and the evaluation of works especially, which he placed in a secondary relationship called an aesthetic symptom, classifying elements and distinguishing them between aesthetic and non-aesthetic. Also, he distinguished the aesthetic notion of art to say that what matters is not the beauty of the artwork, but its aesthetic function. For Goodman, the object of art is not itself a work of art; it only becomes a work of art if the individual sees it in that way or if the context allows it. The example used to clarify his reasoning was the use of a Rembrandt painting to cover a broken window. In this situation, Rembrandt's painting ceased to function as a work of art, but regained it when it was again inserted into a museum. This example was found in Goodman's article, *When is Art?*, wherein one does not question what art is, but when it is. Thus, Goodman renewed his analytic aesthetics by asserting that there is art when something functions symbolically as art.

## The Transfiguration of an Ordinary Object into a Work of Art

However, in response to Goodman's question and the other questions on the meaning of some everyday objects that have acquired the status of a work of art—such as Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes (1964) or Duchamp's readymade Fountain (1915)—Arthur Danto sought answers by comparing two situations: first, if the objects were exposed as a work of art; second, if they could be found or bought for a banal value in any establishment of products of daily use.

However, even if they are in different situations, Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes (1964) or Marcel Duchamp's readymade Fountain (1915) do not distinguish between their equivalents in the supermarket, which was also the intention of the artists: a copy identical to the original. With this, Arthur Danto concluded that only interpretation could clarify this transfiguration of an ordinary object into a work of art—*The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981). However, only knowledge about the arts could allow such an interpretation, exclusively limiting this experience to the artistic universe, and not to that of the population. The artistic universe represents only a small part of society, made up of artists, gallery owners, art dealers, curators, critics, art theorists and historians, aesthetes, and finally, all who are interested in this universe.



However, what counts as an interpretation to consider such banal objects works of art is quality. And, for Danto, it consists of the fact that these qualities are aesthetic. But for these aesthetic qualities to be perceived, it is necessary to encounter the aesthetic experience of the object presented as a work of art so that it can be reacted to and analyzed as art or not art. For this experience, both Arthur Danto and Nelson Goodman considered interpretation the best medium, without judgments of subjective values based on taste and qualitative values. As for what the public has to say, it is only considered in the face of a possible coincidence with the interpretation that the artist himself/herself gave to the work. All the work of interpretation, according to Danto, aims at a better understanding between the intention of the artist and the reception of the public. The personal aspects of the artist and his/her environment are of little interest to this interpretation. The sense of art is only that of a product wherein it is decided that it can be inserted into the dynamics of the artistic universe, articulating its course through language and communication.

The interpretations of Nelson Goodman and Arthur Danto are no less subjective and with pretension to universality in the sense of Kantian reason, as the taste is not a judgment on the beautiful object, but the relationship between the representation of this object and our faculties, the understanding, and imagination. Without rules and without purpose, taste is a subjective feeling. However, it also exists as a hypothesis of universal communication in agreement with those who possess an aesthetic common sense. Such is the meaning of Kantian reflection. Moreover, in confirming this universality of the work, as a consequence of these interpretations, the work would be inserted into the world. Therefore, the historical and sociocultural aspects would not fail to be aesthetically considered.

## Art vs. Not Art

Furthermore, Thierry De Duve – an emeritus professor at the Lille 3 University, philosopher, art historian, and heir to a European tradition of knowledge – has analyzed artistic achievements since 1975. He has considered a growing accentuation in the direction of Adorno's reflections on artistic production in relation to capitalist society, referenced by Horkheimer on Cultural Industry in 1947 in *Dialectic of Enlightenment (Dialektik der Aufklärung)* and, on art in relation to the Cultural Industry, in *Aesthetic Theory (Ästhetische Theorie)*, published in 1970. In this sense, Thierry De Duve concentrated on the representativeness of Marcel Duchamp's work, specifically on the readymades, conditioning them to a process of modernist practice to establish a daily object as a work of art. This process consists, first of all, in the choice of the object, then the presentation to an audience, the reception of that audience, and the role of an institution to label such an object a work of art.

Therefore, according to Thierry De Duve, following these conditions, art would be only an institutional game, conditioning the values of modern art as rules and norms for contemporary art. And, contrary to this sense for Thierry De Duve, it is necessary to separate Duchamp from this norm – values of modern art aiming at the rupture of tradition. However, this process begins with the personal aesthetic game of someone responsible so that such an object is named a work of art, and with that appointment, inserts itself into the modern jurisprudence such that the history is constructed. However, in commenting on the readymades, De Duve analyzed Duchamp's sense of distancing from the conventional work of art, when the artist stated in an interview with Georges Charbonnier in 1961 that art is to make and is always an act of choice (it is still choosing). Thus, readymades are not mere found objects but chosen objects. It is a meeting between the object and the author. In this sense, an ink tube can be seen as a readymade, since it is the first choice to be able to elaborate the painting. Therefore, for this relationship, De Duve established a comparison between the painter and the professional artist. And, from this situation, it seeks a resolution in Kantian theory, in the sense of natural beauty and artistic beauty. Through the transcendental Kantian aesthetic, De Duve understood the status of the work of art concerning the readymade, transferring the sense of the beautiful to the sense of art. What is meant by a paradigm shift is the beauty, which was formerly related to the absolute, the idea of perfection, in a relationship with nature. In this way, art can now be understood as art related to the historical context of modernity: art versus not art.

Finally, this conception of the history of art as jurisprudence almost demands the constitution of a place of transmission different from the galleries and museums of contemporary art, in which future works can arise in an appeal to a climate and environment without needing precautions to be institutionalized. It is difficult to find non-institutionalized artwork in the universe of contemporary art. As well as not being part of the system of art in general, considering evident, all exchange of values relations. This also applies to public works, which is precisely why these have corporate sponsorships and government tax support or incentives. For example, *Cloud Gate* is a public sculpture by artist Anish Kapoor, hosted by AT&T Plaza at Millennium Park, Chicago, Illinois as *figure 3* shows.



Figure 3. Anish Kapoor, *Cloud Gate*. Chicago, Illinois. Photo by Alex Powell.

## Visible World of Art and the Return of Real

In the 1970s, art critics and historians Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss, creators of the prestigious art magazine *October*, stood out. These American critics and historians followed the same criteria and methods to develop their theories on contemporary art. Rosalind Krauss developed the main method. It eliminates transcendence for the understanding of art, recognizing that any abstract exteriority concerning art conditions the rupture of art with the visible world. Her theory follows the European line of sign language, the semiology of Ferdinand Saussure. And, unlike the formalistic method used by Clement Greenberg, she understood that the works presented a diversity of perspectives and a series of representations, independently of the relationship between the artist and his/her work. Rosalind Krauss's theory of contemporary art is used in many criticisms. However, by itself, this work is entirely represented in the analysis of Picasso's collages by considering them a visual metalanguage. As each piece of newspaper pasted covers the preceding, the absence of the original plan is manifested. The difference between figure and ground disappears, the sign appears as the shape and performs the work, and more important meaning representation. The origin of the painting ceases to be represented. There is only the idea of the original object as representation, without the need for painting, and there may be another ideal representation, which could be something else – not the simple designation of absence as represented in the collage. Finally, Rosalind Krauss' theory continues to develop, breaking with tradition in the history of art by defining new methods and concepts for knowledge through art, contributing to the criticism of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century art.

Hal Foster presented – in his work *The Return of the Real* (2001) – a non-idealistic view of the history of art in his theory on modern and contemporary art. He introduced a transdisciplinary method through a recontextualization of the historical challenges of contemporary creation. His critical analysis linked the past with the present, establishing the interdependence between modernism and postmodernism, thus redefining the avant-garde notion of the years 1910-1920 to the present day. Be it new-avant-garde or post-vanguard, Foster has, as great reference, the work of Peter Bürger for this analysis of time and the vanguards in its limits. In retrospect, the aspect of non-linear historicity – or anachronistic – is supported by Walter Benjamin's theories. Throughout his work, Foster demonstrated, through genealogy, the understanding of this new vanguard from the pop art of Warhol to the kitsch-art of Jeff Koons in its repetitive aspects that, according to him, can present its subversive characteristic.

## Final Consideration

The history of art has long been guided by reference systems such as the concept of imitation—*mimesis*—natural or ideal beauty, harmony and the established criteria that still influence our perception and our understanding of current forms of creation. In modern art, breaking with the academic canons and with traditional values, the art presented itself in a transgressive and subversive way. In contemporary art, all its meaning is different from that of modern art, instead of an approach to art and life. Before there were criteria to establish the meaning of art and select the reference and, in the present day, the absence of these criteria, with only time to choose among the contemporary works, those that mark history are those that become unforgettable while others are forgotten, according to the values of the sociocultural context of our day. The great controversy at that time is strictly related to the repertoire of classical theories and the critic of modern art to analyze contemporary art achievements, to explain or legitimize the present creation. Before, every object of art was related to the ideal of beauty. However, this standard does not make sense anymore – first, due to the dissolution of the fine arts as a result of the breakdown of traditional criteria and norms, and then as a consequence of sociocultural transformations. From the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, a new sense was found for the history of Western art, which, when analyzed by American theorist and art critic Harold Rosenberg (1907- 1978), would be conditioned to a redefinition, compromising the notion one had about art rather than specifically about the current work of art. However, for the philosopher and esthete Marc Jimenez (2005), nowadays, it is not a matter of questioning the artistic achievements in their particularities, problematizing them, and refusing them as works of art in the face of the old notions about art. But, instead, it is about enabling new aesthetic experiences or, rather, creating a new worldview.

However, to evaluate the quality of a work of art, the values of aesthetic judgment and taste remain under discussion, as well as the search for criteria and norms for a reference. Indeed, the criteria established for the selection of artists and works by public or private institutions are of great interest, especially for those who relate to the universe of the arts and then to the public. These criteria for the selection of the artist and his/her works are almost always, today, established by the curator. But this is not a general rule. The curator or art critic has great significance in mediating his/her aesthetic judgment between the artist, the institution, and the public, forming an opinion through communication and establishing notions and values that encompass the entire universe of the arts. However, the criteria that guide artists, gallerists, curators, critics, and cultural institutions have remained, since the beginning of the 20th century, without definition. It is no novelty that after modernism, the criteria established during the previous centuries no longer held any meaning. In our day, 21<sup>st</sup> century art found in galleries, museums, and cultural institutions has become an object of specialists, professionals in the art and culture market.

## Author Biography

Christiane Wagner is the Editor in Chief, founder and head of [Art Style Magazine](#).

Visiting Professor of Aesthetics and Sciences of Communication, Postdoc, UNICAMP, (2014-2018). PhD in Sciences of Art and Aesthetics, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, First Class Honours Thesis. Master in Sciences of Communication and PhD in Design and Architecture, University of São Paulo. She attended the Academy of Visual Arts, Frankfurt, graduated at the College of Fine Arts, São Paulo. Recent publications: *Aesthetic Experience: Visual Culture as the Masterpiece of Nonhumanity*, *On Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture*, Gießen, 2016; *Poïésis: entre la raison et la sensibilité. Les nouveaux médiums de l'art*, French Journal for Media Research, Toulouse, 2017; *Art and Perfect Illusion: From Architecture to Cinema. On the Era of Technological Convergence*. "Image Evolution. Technological Transformations of Visual Media Culture". Yearbook of Moving Image Studies, 38-61. Marburg: Büchner, 2018. *Artworks and the Paradoxes of the Media-Transmitted Reality*. [Accepted publication] 21<sup>st</sup> International Congress of Aesthetics, 2019. *Aesthetics and Cultural Aspects of Bauhaus Towards a New Conception*. [Accepted publication] 21<sup>st</sup> International Congress of Aesthetics, 2019.

Researcher ID: T-9766-2017 | ORCID: 0000-0002-3445-1446

### Note

<sup>1</sup> Balaguer, Mark. "Platonism in Metaphysics,"

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